

The Fault in Our Stars by John Green- Coping with mortality (article 1 of 3)

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Smith, Nancy F. "Coping With Loss." *Real Simple* 9.9 (2008): 236. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 13 Aug. 2013.

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Section:

Features

Coping with Loss

MENTAL ILLNESS

FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS

FRIENDS

FUNERALS

ANXIETY

PSYCHOLOGY

See also additional image(s) in Table of Contents of same issue.

Each of us has lost, or will lose, something dear. A friendship. A pet. A home, a job, or a parent. And the grief that follows doesn't come with a road map. But, as new research suggests, it's just that unknown that can help see you through.

My sister and I had considered ourselves best friends since we were children. As young women, we shared an ambition for more independent lives, to know the world beyond small-town Texas, and we were united in our determination to succeed. We were inseparable. So it was shattering when, about 15 years ago, our friendship suddenly dissolved. It was as deep a

sadness as I had ever felt, made all the more difficult because I had no idea what had caused the breach. Family ties held-brief conversations at family gatherings-but the intimacy of friendship, the shared secrets and holidays, slipped away. Attempts to repair the estrangement only seemed to make it worse. It took years to give a name to the emotional response I felt over the loss. I recognized it when my mother died some years later: grief. Just as I grieved the loss of my mother, I had grieved the loss of my sister's friendship.

Loss is as much a part of human existence as breathing. It is an everyday event: a lost wallet, earring, investment opportunity. In most cases, we ponder what might have happened, get a little agitated, then quickly move on. But then there are losses that can't just be shrugged off-voids that trigger a powerful kind of emotional response, like the one I had over my sister. Chances are, you've felt like this, too, if your home was somehow destroyed, you lost a job or a beloved pet, or your marriage ended in divorce. Maybe your health was devastated by a chronic illness or you experienced the death of a loved one.

Whenever a loss suddenly and irrevocably changes the course of your life, breaking the line from the past you cherished to the future you counted on, the complex feelings of pain you experience can all be classified as grief. "The basic core of grief," says Holly Prigerson, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, "is wanting what you can no longer have." Yet grief is not a standard, one-size-fits-all response to life's woes. Your reactions will probably differ with every loss you experience-sometimes unpredictably. (The death of a beloved pet, for example, might floor you more than the end of a marriage.) And how we each exhibit grief-emotionally, psychologically, physically-is as varied as our DNA. In fact, a new body of research (more than 4,000 studies on the psychology of loss have been published in the past two decades) overwhelmingly shows that there is no single, optimal way to grieve a loss, despite our ingrained expectations. Other findings are reassuring, too: The majority of us manage to heal, and many even find a positive outcome to our sadness. "Grief can be a bittersweet beauty," says Robert A. Neimeyer, a professor of psychology at the University of Memphis. "It's not something to be banished. It is a human experience to be lived, to be shared, and to be understood and used."

Searching for ANSWERS

Here's what many of us assume grief to be: a sharp sense of sadness that diminishes in intensity as time passes. There should probably be crying. And the whole thing should probably fade almost entirely at some point, depending on the loss. (Maybe a month seems right to you for grieving a lost job; a bit longer for a pet or a home; perhaps a year for the death of someone close.) If we don't display some sense of sadness, the thinking goes, we risk a full-blown grief response exploding upon us sometime down the road. When it plays out differently, we can compound our sadness by questioning our response: What does it say about a person if she doesn't cry? Do moments of real joy in the face of loss mean repressed feelings? Has the distress gone on for too long?

Blame popular theories, at least in part, for the confusion. Since 1917, when Sigmund Freud published his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," clinicians have viewed grieving as a

temporary-if painful-passage that could and should be navigated as quickly as possible. The goal was to put whatever you had lost behind you, break all bonds with it, and work through the grief until you had returned to some preloss equilibrium. "Old attachments had to be completely severed before you could invest energy in new relationships or activities," says Camille B. Wortman, a professor of psychology at Stony Brook University, in New York.

More recent theories describe a series of stages you have to pass through when grieving a loss. The most prominent of these stage theories was defined by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her groundbreaking book *On Death and Dying*, first published in 1969. Although Kubler-Ross's work describes the emotional responses of terminal patients to their imminent deaths, her theory has, over the years, come to be applied to grief that is the result of all kinds of loss. The first reaction is denial: "No, not me. This cannot be true. It must be a mistake." From there, anger, often directed at everyone and everything around the person. Then bargaining: "If I make a real effort at reconciliation, I'll get my marriage back." Depression is next, as the reality of the loss settles in. And, finally, acceptance. To cope successfully with your grief, according to such theories, you must experience, resolve, and move through each of these stages in sequence. Only then have you fully "recovered."

A new UNDERSTANDING

Today most experts have shifted away from the idea of a prescribed series of stages toward a view of grief as a transition that people manage in their own, individual ways and, for the most part, with relative ease. "Most people go back and forth from intense states of sadness-a powerful yearning for the thing lost-to stretches of feeling fine, but not necessarily in any kind of sequential order," says George A. Bonanno, a professor of psychology at Columbia University. And it doesn't happen within a prescribed time frame, despite what friends, relatives, and even therapists might suggest. It turns out that, for most of us, the grieving process occurs in fits and starts. And for an especially intense loss, like the death of a loved one, it can go on for much longer than might be expected. "It's normal to have episodes of grief for years," says Prigerson. "It can be 30 years later and you'll still remember how sad you were when your mom died. That's perfectly normal."

It can be just as normal to feel little or no grief in the face of a great loss. In a study comparing bereaved people with a group who had not suffered a loss, Bonanno and his colleagues found that slightly more than half of the bereaved showed no more distress than did those who had not suffered a loss. Of the bereaved group, the overwhelming majority did not experience any spike in distress later on, which might have suggested a delayed response. The researchers concluded that a minimal display of grief is far more common than would be expected and that the predicted negative fallout ("If you bottle it up, it will explode on you later") is almost nonexistent.

In fact, a large majority of people-85 percent, say some studies-deal with loss well. "What that means is you're able to carry on with the two fundamental aspects of life: work and love," Bonanno says. Most people can concentrate and focus sufficiently to carry out required tasks. They manage the duties of their jobs and can be close and available to loved ones. And

despite their sadness, they have moments of happiness. (Those for whom grief is more debilitating may need clinical help; see *When Loss Overwhelms*, opposite, for the signs.) Paradoxically, the capacity for positive emotions in the early aftermath of a loss predicts a better overall adjustment later on. "It's how we're able to manage the pain," says Bonanno, "because it's not constant-it comes and goes. We call that resilience. It doesn't mean you don't grieve. You just cope with it fairly well."

Making sense of LOSS

How do we find reason in having something or someone we love taken away? The first impulse is to confront that most basic of human questions: Why me? Why did I lose my job while my colleague in the next office did not? Why was my house consumed in the fire but not my neighbor's? But nailing down answers isn't the only way to make sense of what you're going through.

Rituals can help with the early, painful stages of loss. Funerals, memorial services, throwing a wake for an old job, and divorce parties all give us a structured opportunity to just "feel whatever we feel," says Bonanno.

Talking about your experience can help you determine your path forward. When you experience a loss, it changes your life story. Characters or possessions are added or gone. Relationships shift. Daily routines are undone. Long-held roles are altered. Before a divorce, for instance, your life was structured around many identities, one of which was spouse. Now that part of your story has to be "rewritten," preferably in a way that doesn't obliterate the good memories or the continuing connections. By speaking about your loss to family members, clergy, friends, even to yourself in a journal-you can reshape the narrative.

Loss can even be a catalyst for positive growth. Stephen R. Shuchter, a professor of clinical psychiatry, and Sidney Zisook, a professor of psychiatry, have studied hundreds of widows in ongoing research at the University of California, San Diego, and many of them have reported that their experience has changed them for the better: altering their priorities, enhancing their feelings of compassion for others, and boosting their sense of independence. Part of coping with loss is to incorporate the resultant life changes in ways that allow you to heal without forgetting. The important thing to remember, notes Alan D. Wolfelt, director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, in Fort Collins, Colorado, is that "coping with loss is not about closure. Grief is a transformative life experience, not a rush to a resolution."

I recently came across a photograph of my sister and me. We're just kids, two towheaded, knobby-kneed tomboys side by side under a tree on a bright summer afternoon. I found myself smiling, drawn back into all the adventures shared by those two best friends. That's when I knew grief had run its course. You mourn. You adapt. You remember. It's called resilience.

When loss overwhelms

For some, the grief response may reach the level of clinical depression or generate a sense of uncertainty that borders on anxiety or panic. Here are the symptoms that indicate a need for professional help.

A sadness so intense that it begins to interfere with your life. You don't go out. You avoid people. Nothing lifts your feelings of gloom.

A debilitating sense of guilt, because you can't shake the feeling that you should have been able to prevent the loss.

Increased anger at or irritation by others who don't appear to understand your feelings or who, you believe, haven't experienced the same kind of loss.

Reliance on alcohol or drugs to alleviate the sadness.

Sleep disruptions, especially beyond six months.

Severe depression and hopelessness about the future. Thoughts of suicide.

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder: reexperiencing the loss event through flashbacks or nightmares, memory and concentration problems, anxiety, a tendency to be easily startled.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

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By Nancy F. Smith

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## *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green- Coping with mortality (article 2 of 3)

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Sanders, Topher. "Becoming 'Real' Men At Last." *Newsweek* 145.22 (2005): 16-17. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 13 Aug. 2013.

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#### Section:

My Turn

#### Becoming 'Real' Men at Last

**It took a terrible loss for us to show each other how much we really felt.**

When I first saw Ronald, I broke down in tears. I inched next to him on the couch where he was rocking back and forth and repeating, between sobs, "My mama, my mama." Not knowing what to do, I put my hand on his back.

Earlier that day I had come home from school and found my mother in the living room, waiting to give me the bad news that Ronald's (not his real name) mother, our next-door neighbor, had died. I knew she'd fallen ill earlier in the week, but everyone had been optimistic about her recovery. Her death was a shock. I sat there with my mouth hanging open, trying to remember when I had last seen her. Then my thoughts turned to Ronald, my friend for the last five years. "Have you talked to him?" I asked my mother.

"Haven't you been listening? I just said he called for you," she said.

She continued speaking, but her mouth was a silent blur. What was my responsibility to Ronald? I wanted to say: "I am only 15 years old. What am I supposed to do?" But my mother was a mess of tears.

I had faced a similar situation two years before, when my grandfather died. I was closer to my grandfather than any other man in my life; he was the only male in the family whom I saw on a regular basis. It was a loss I should have mourned heavily, but at 13, I stood by his grave site burdened with a misunderstanding of what it meant to be a man. I shed no tears. I was working so hard to maintain the kind of stoicism I'd seen in the movies--the kind that's

permanently etched on the faces of leading men like Denzel Washington--that I didn't think about how I felt.

On the day of Ronald's mother's death, the emotional ineptitude I felt at my grandfather's funeral came rushing back. I picked up the phone to tell our friends what had happened. "Hello, Ricky?" I asked.

"Yeah, what's up, man?" he said.

"Man, Ronald's mother died," I said, not believing what I was saying.

There was a moment of silence. "I'll be right there," he said, his voice catching.

One by one, I made similar calls to all our friends. One by one, they all promised to come right away.

Now, sitting next to Ronald with tears in my eyes, I felt insufficient and small. The pain on his face was unlike any I had seen before. I had never witnessed a man comforting another man, and I wasn't sure what to do. Unconsciously, I pulled him toward me, and he responded by collapsing in my arms, as if that had been his desire all along. As I held him and our tears flowed, I found myself filled with a kind of freedom that my adolescent existence hadn't permitted before.

When our friends entered the room, I saw the emotion swell in all of them as they surveyed the scene. Instantly, they joined me at Ronald's side, all of us crying. There we were: four teenage black males, all without fathers, all without examples of this type of personal expression. But for a few minutes, we were able to cloak our friend in love and support.

It would be less than honest to say only black men find it difficult to show their deepest feelings; indeed, men of all races must wade through stereotypes of masculinity in order to find the true and varied nature of manhood. But far too many black men are left to figure it out on their own, with only the one-dimensional characters they find in movies and hip-hop music as role models.

It is often said that black men are hardened by life. Perhaps this is because so many of us grow up in single-parent homes, in environments where anything but a calcified exterior is interpreted as weakness. Weakness is considered the most detrimental quality a man can have. It isn't long before this shell begins to affect the choices we make and the relationships we have. We carry this unwillingness to confront, discuss or deal with emotion with us throughout our lives.

It had always been "daps" (a kind of handshake) and hugs between me, Ronald and our friends in the hallways of our mostly black high school, but it rarely went any deeper than that. We didn't confide in each other about our problems or share our feelings.

It didn't change after that day at Ronald's house. The daps didn't get more intricate and the embraces didn't last longer, but there was a sense of closeness and respect that hadn't existed before. We never talked about this new bond, but that didn't matter.

For one night, as we huddled together in tears, we had refuted our erroneous ideas of masculinity. Our tears had felt right. They had felt responsible. And while many of my tears were for Ronald and his loss, more than a few were for my grandfather.

PHOTO (COLOR): SHOULDER TO LEAN ON: I had never witnessed a man comforting another man

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By Topher Sanders

Sanders lives in Montgomery, Ala.

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The Fault in Our Stars by John Green- Coping with mortality (article 3 of 3)

Lakeland teenager with rare cancer saying goodbye through song (w/ video)

By Mary Divine mdivine@pioneerpress.com TwinCities.com-Pioneer Press

Posted:

TwinCities.com

For Zach Sobiech, life is crutches and chemo.

It's making deals with God. It's taking 13 pills at a time without water. It's clumps of curly hair in the trash. It's crying in bed late at night and laughing with friends. It's declaring a ban on homework for his senior year at Stillwater Area High School.

It's also finding ways to say goodbye.

Zach, 17, has a rare form of bone cancer and was told in June that he had months -- maybe a year -- to live. Now, he is writing and recording songs of farewell, including "Clouds," a tune he wrote for his girlfriend:

Well I fell down, down, down

Into this dark and lonely hole.

There was no one there to care about me anymore,

And I needed a way to climb and grab a hold of the edge.

You were sitting there holding a rope,

And we'll go up, up, up

But I'll fly a little higher.

We'll go up in the clouds because the view is a little nicer

Up here my dear.

It won't be long now, it won't be long now.

Zach was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in the fall of 2009. The cancer started in his hip and has spread to his pelvis and lungs. When a scan in October showed about 20 new lesions in his lungs, Zach's mom suggested he start writing letters to say goodbye.

"I'm not good at writing letters," Zach said recently at his Lakeland home. "So I figured instead, I could just write songs for people, and they might be around longer. It's more powerful than writing a letter because a song can get stuck in your head. You find yourself humming it during the day."

He wrote "For My Grace" for his sister Grace, who is 14. "I love all my siblings, but I have the strongest relationship with Grace," he said. "We've been that way ever since we were little. I knew if I could write a song for anyone, I could write one for her."

His song "Fix Me Up" is for Samantha "Sammy" Brown, whom he has known since they were toddlers. Zach and Sammy started singing together a few years ago; their first CD, "Blueberries," will be released Saturday, Dec. 15, and features them singing to each other in "Fix Me Up":

Just promise me ...

Just promise me ...

That you'll never give up, and never look back.

I won't give up.

I'll keep on trying.

Dry your tears up.

All your crying cannot fix me up, my darling.

Listening to Zach's songs after he is gone will be a comfort, Sammy said.

"It's kind of his way of haunting us -- in the most friendly of ways," she said. "He doesn't want anything left unsaid. A lot of his lyrics are things that you know that he's feeling, but he doesn't say a lot of that to anybody because he's a teenage boy. It's hard for guys at that age to be open, but music is an excuse for him to get it out there."

RELEASE FOR EMOTIONS

Zach got a guitar for Christmas when he was 11 and started taking lessons from Joe Schertz, a musician who lives in West Lakeland Township. Schertz, owner of the School of Music & Mayhem, also works with Sammy and Zach on their songwriting.

On a recent Tuesday night at Schertz's studio, the duo worked on a new song called "Apple." Sammy jotted down lyrics in a thick spiral notebook while Zach and Schertz played guitar. Another friend, Reed Redmon, played percussion.

An apple a day ...

But we all know that's not true.

But I'll take a bite, and maybe it might

give me more time with you.

Coming up with the next lines was harder.

"We could do something with an orchard," Sammy suggested. "Something like, 'But I don't have an orchard ...' "

Working on songs such as "Apple" is an opportunity "to get emotions out without freaking out in public," Zach said.

When Schertz started urging Zach to write songs, he resisted.

"I always was a shy kid -- I still kind of am -- but he was always telling me to song-write, and I'm like, 'I'm 13; I'm not going to put my feelings on a piece of paper,' " Zach said. "But once I started, I realized what he was talking about. I get it now. It feels good to be able to write a song and feel fulfilled. And getting everything out on one page and then being able to share it with people is even cooler."

Schertz said Zach has a unique perspective because his life has a "time stamp" on it.

Zach agrees.

"You've got to take what you have, and I've been blessed with something, so I want to use it to the best of my ability," he said. "You got it, use it."

In his song "Months," Zach details his illness in 12 steps.

February was metallic,

And still I March on.

April's rain and more pain.

May nudges me along.

Zach's parents, Rob and Laura Sobiech, are glad he is telling his story.

"You have something big and scary, and this is your story ..." Laura Sobiech tells him.

"There's also great opportunity. People will listen to you. That's the gift that comes with this: You have your podium now."

'CLOUDS' ON THE AIR

Zach's music career recently got a major boost. He was selected to be featured in the KS95 for Kids Radiothon, a benefit for the Children's Cancer Research Fund and Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare. The two-day annual fundraiser has raised more than \$12 million since it was started in 1999.

When Zach and his mom went to KSTP-FM in July to be interviewed for a piece that aired Thursday, Dec. 6, Zach played a cover of a Jason Mraz tune called "I'm Yours."

KS95 producers wanted to hear more and asked him to send in an original tune. Zach sent them an acoustic version of "Clouds."

"It was beautiful, and it was touching, and it was poignant," said Dan Seeman, vice president and market manager for KS95/Hubbard Radio in St. Paul. "Everyone who listened to it had that same reaction: 'This is really good.' This young man really struck a chord with a lot of people here ... because he loves the music business, and we are in the music business."

After Seeman heard the song, he was moved to do more. He called a musician friend, John Lynn, and told him about "Clouds."

"I said, 'Is there any chance to get a studio band together to do this for Zach?' " Seeman said. "John called back a day later and said, 'I got a drummer, I got a bass player, I got a lead guitar.' "

Karl Demer, owner of Atomic K Records & Production in Minneapolis, and his crew offered their services. Mike Rominski, who works at Hubbard and owns Woolly Rhino Productions, videotaped the 5 1/2-hour recording session.

"Everybody donated their time," Seeman said. "It was a wonderful experience for Zach, but the (musicians) loved every minute of it, too. It all just came together."

Seeman said he hopes the music video of "Clouds" -- which includes slides explaining Zach's battle with cancer -- becomes an Internet sensation.

"Here's this young man who's got a million-dollar smile and nothing but positivity," he said. "I could not even imagine what he's going through. There's just this grace and this wisdom coming from this 17-year-old boy. We have a lot to learn from him."

'NO HISTORY OF CANCER'

Zach, the third of four children, was jogging with his sister Alli in August 2009 when his left hip started to hurt. He went to physical therapy for two months; doctors thought he might have a hip flexor problem, "something that wasn't necessarily showing up as a break on the X-ray," Laura Sobiech said. "It's just very classic overlooking of osteosarcoma. It's almost always overlooked."

By November, Zach couldn't bend over to tie his shoes. Doctors brought him in for magnetic resonance imaging and found the tumor -- which had grown to almost plum size -- in his femoral head.

"We had a lot of hope that it wasn't cancer," Laura Sobiech said. "I remember reading about osteosarcoma, and what that entailed, and just deciding, 'You know, we're not going to do that.' He was a normal, healthy kid, and we have no history of cancer in the family."

About 400 children and adolescents are diagnosed with osteosarcoma in the United States each year. Osteosarcoma tumors develop in rapidly growing bones during a growth spurt, said Brenda Weigel, Zach's primary oncologist at the University of Minnesota and a chief medical adviser for the Children's Cancer Research Fund. Tumors are generally found in the

arms or legs, particularly around the knee and shoulder, but they can also arise in the spinal column or the pelvis, or any bone in the body, she said.

Survival rates depend on the location of the tumor and whether the cancer spreads. The overall cure rate is about 65 percent, but when the cancer spreads, there is only a 20 percent chance of survival, Weigel said.

"It didn't really hit me right away," Zach said. "I don't know if it actually has yet. I remember waking up and finding out, and I was, like, 'I'm going back to sleep.' It didn't seem real."

The tumor, located where the leg turns at an angle to meet the hip, meant Zach's hip bone was "very fragile," Laura Sobiech said. "Any weight on it would break it."

The 6-foot-1 teen, who dreamed of being a wide receiver in the NFL, had to start using crutches immediately and began chemotherapy. He had his tumor removed and hip replaced in February 2010.

"The tumor was 100 percent necrotic -- he didn't have any lung lesions, and the chemo was working," Laura Sobiech said. "We were ecstatic because that's as good as you can get with this."

Zach continued with chemo treatments until July 2010. Five days after he completed chemo, computerized tomography -- a CT -- showed the cancer had spread to his lungs.

Four open-chest surgeries, called thoracotomies, followed. In all, Zach has undergone 10 surgeries, spent more than 100 days in the hospital for chemotherapy treatments and undergone 15 radiation treatments.

He said he takes life in three-month chunks -- that's the length of time between his CT scans.

"You live right here," Zach said. "You live right in front of you. You don't focus on anything in the future. You make small plans and focus on those. It's the little things, honestly. It sounds cliché, but it's true. It's the little things that get you through the day."

HIGHER POWER

Zach's father, Rob Sobiech, is the logistics manager at DiaSorin Inc. in Stillwater. Laura Sobiech grew up in Lake Elmo, works at St. Croix Valley Dental in Stillwater and serves on the Lower St. Croix Valley Fire Department.

The family belongs to St. Michael's Catholic Church in Stillwater. They keep a relic of St. Peregrine -- the patron saint of those suffering from cancer -- in the living room of their house near the St. Croix River.

"When Zach was first diagnosed, I remember thinking: 'God can see us. We're not just plugging along, living our lives,'" Laura Sobiech said. "I told God, 'You can have him, but it had better be good. It had better be something big.'"

Zach likes to attend church by himself early in the morning. "Zach gets that this is just a part of life -- it's not all of life," his mother said. "I think that's how all of us have tackled this. Truthfully, we have always been given the grace to get through each big thing."

Zach has roomed with children at the University of Minnesota Amplatz Children's Hospital in Minneapolis whose families are not religious, Laura Sobiech said.

"I would like to say I don't know how people do it without faith, but I do, I've seen it, and it's not pretty," she said. "It's really hard sometimes. You just know that there's nothing there holding them up, and it's really painful to watch ... because they despair."

The Sobiechs' faith led them to Lourdes, France, earlier this year. The water from Lourdes, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared in 1858, supposedly has healing powers.

A woman from St. Michael's suggested the trip, and she and her husband offered to pay for Rob, Laura and Zach's trip. Money raised at a benefit last year helped pay for Zach's brother, Sam, and Grace to accompany them. In all, 11 members of the family and one of Zach's best friends traveled to Rome, Lourdes and Paris for 10 days in March.

Lourdes was "possibly the most peaceful place I've ever been," Zach said. "I just remember going into the baths, and it's super cold, but when you come out, the sun was out, and you just felt super clean. And the river is right there, and it's making noise ... and you just felt happy. It was awesome."

But by the end of the trip, the Sobiechs noticed Zach was limping.

"We thought that with the hip replacement that maybe the hip socket was damaged and needed to be replaced," Laura Sobiech said.

Positron emission tomography -- a PET scan -- revealed that the cancer had invaded the left side of Zach's pelvis. Surgery to remove it would have left him unable to sit up.

Zach says he's not an angry person, but he's had bad days. "You cry in bed," he said. "You cry yourself to sleep, but it's not worth wasting that time because you only have so much."

The first week of school this year was especially awful, he said.

"It was like: 'OK, senior year. The next thing is college. You've got to get ready for it,' and I'm like: 'No, I don't. I really don't,' " he said.

Despite undergoing intensive therapy that involved as many as 17 pills a day, scans in October showed that the number of lesions in Zach's lungs had exploded.

"I emailed all of my teachers and said, 'Here's the deal: I'm just not feeling it. I'm not doing homework anymore,' " he said.

Zach still goes to school each day but spends a lot of time in class writing songs.

"He wants to learn, and he wants to be involved. He just doesn't want to do the homework," Laura Sobiech said.

Just in case his doctors are wrong, Zach has applied to the University of Minnesota. The topic for his college application essay -- "Tell us about an experience that has changed your life" -- was easy, he said.

"To be honest, I wish I could worry about school," Zach wrote. "But instead I have to worry about how my little sister is going to feel when I die, how my family will get along without me, or what will become of my friends."

His latest round of chemo seems to be doing some good. "It seems to be stalling it," Laura Sobiech said. "The lesions weren't growing any more, and some of them were actually shrinking. We're hopeful that he'll get several more months, but it can go downhill very quickly."

Zach takes it all in stride, she said. "He knows where this is all going to end, apart from a miracle."

If that miracle occurs, Zach jokes that he'll have a different problem: He'll have to complete all those missed homework assignments.

He hopes to make it to his 18th birthday May 3 and to his sister Alli's wedding May 31. "That would be huge if we could do that and have him there and not in a whole lot of pain," Laura Sobiech said. "We know our options are fading. It seems like, well, maybe we'll get a little bit more time now. That's kind of what it's about now -- it's gaining a little more time, and then, maybe, a miracle."

Zach and his friends don't dwell on his cancer. His girlfriend, Amy Adamle, 17, of Woodbury, doesn't treat him any differently because of his diagnosis, he said.

"He's just Zach," Amy said. "We both have our days, but we're there for each other, so it works."

Amy is "strong enough to share the load with me," Zach says. "She knows how to say things in a way that fixes everything."

"I don't think I'll ever really be ready to let go of him," Amy says. "No matter what, it's going to be really hard. I don't ever really feel bad for myself -- I've been so lucky to know him."

Said Sammy Brown: "Most of the time when we're together, we don't think about it, or we don't talk about it. I'm not saying that we can't or that we try to ignore it on purpose. It's just really easy, when we're together, to forget about all that. I just feel lucky that he's choosing to spend time with me when he knows he doesn't have much time left."

Zach sings of wanting more time in "Clouds."

If only I had a little bit more time,

If only I had a little bit more time with you,

We could go up, up, up

And take that little ride.

And sit there holding hands

And everything would be just right.

And maybe someday I'll see you again.

We'll float up in the clouds, and we'll never see the end.

Mary Divine can be reached at 651-228-5443. Follow her at twitter.com/MaryEDivine.

ONLINE

To see the video of "Clouds," go to youtube.com/watch?v=sDC97j6lfyc.

To donate to the Zach Sobiech Osteosarcoma Fund or to download an MP3 of "Clouds," go to childrenscancer.org/zach/.

IF YOU GO

What: A fundraiser for Zach Sobiech and the Children's Cancer Research Fund, including live music and dancing. Semiformal wear is encouraged.

When: 6 to 11 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 15

Where: Withrow Ballroom, May Township

Cost: Donation

For more information: caringbridge.org/visit/zacharysobiech.